DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 402 SO 025 287

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TITLE History: Teaching and Methods.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Media; Higher Education; Historiography; *History; *History Instruction; *Instructional Materials; *Teacher Education; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a review of recent literature about teaching history to address what history is (or purports to be), why educators should teach history, and what new teaching methods are now being used. Methods discussed in the paper include: (1) active learning situations, such as debate, demonstration, and simulation; (2) specialized topics approach; (3) utilizing primary source materials; (4) use of historical films; (5) use of the library; and (6) use of historical fiction. The paper advocates teaching history from a humanistic perspective in which students can relate past events to present lives. (EH)

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History: Teaching and Methods

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Abstract

History involves what people have done and created in the past. It includes politics, religion, leisure and social activities, and day to day life. As humans, we should recognize history as an integral part of our lives. This makes history teaching a challenge for anyone considering this profession. There is a great need to teach history teachers how to teach. This means beginning their training while the prospective teachers are graduate TAs. There are several methods a teacher can use to make history more vibrant. Active learning techniques, films, library research, specialized topics, and historical fiction can all be used to make teaching and learning history more invigorating. Regardless of what methods are used, however, it is important to apply a humanistic approach when teaching history.

INTRODUCTION

Few educators would deny the need to teach history in our secondary schools, junior colleges, and universities. Recently, however, it seems as though history sometimes takes a "back seat" to other "social sciences" (e.g., economics and political science). By reviewing some of the recent literature about teaching history, this paper describes what history is (or purports to be), why we should teach history, and what new teaching methods are now being used.

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Many people view history as an enumeration of facts, figures, dates, and otherwise "useless" and "dull" trivia. One professor found, to his considerable dismay, that when he told people he was an historian, the typical response was, "I could never remember all those dates and battles" (Cannon 1989, p.245). While history is concerned with events and when they happened, upon closer examination, we find it is more than that. However, there is no one concrete definition of history except to say that it deals with people and what has happened to them. According to Graves (1992), "History is the record of what people did or failed to do" (p.177). History is not "a series of isolated events. It is people living together, and trying to solve problems together" (Johnson and Ebert 1991, p.5).

History studies people and in doing so takes into account ethnic groups, social trends, religion, philosophy, sex, political orientations, and what Peter Sterns (1989) defines as social history: history which looks at demographic trends, leisure activities, emotional changes, family relationships, and childhood. Social history examines "trends ... and processes rather than events and individual personalities" (pp. 2, 14).

Everything with which people have been involved has a history. Musical forms, like classical or rock, have histories; inventions which affect day to day life, like the

computer or the car, have histories worth looking at. Ultimately, however, history is hard to define. Even the most learned of historians can only know a "fragment" of the total history to be explained (Cannon 1989, p. 250).

WHY SHOULD WE TEACH HISTORY?

Teaching and learning at least some history is imperative to our survival as persons with understanding. A knowledge of history has the potential to give people new perspectives on where we have been, and where we may be going in the future:

> By equipping students with knowledge not only of past events, but also of different interpretations of past events and a means to evaluate the interpretations, teachers will be doing them an enormous service (Duthie 1989, p. 137).

Students often complain that history is boring and irrelevant. This is because much of the teaching of history has been reduced to a recitation of trivia that has little or no application to the daily lives of most students. However, history teachers can make history exciting by discussing current, relevant problems and seeing where such problems "lead back and forth across the centuries" (Evans 1989, p. 38). By doing this, history teachers can become what Cannon (1989) calls the best of all "general educators" (p. 254).

TRAINING HISTORY TEACHERS

While Evans has made an excellent suggestion for making history more than "useless" trivia (Evans 1989, p. 38), much of the problem lies with an educational system that does not teach potential history instructors how to teach. The old idea that "teachers are born, not made" is a myth. History teachers, especially, need to learn how to teach their subject effectively in order to make it pertinent to their students' lives. Just because one has earned a Ph.D. or M.A. does not mean that person is equipped to teach.

Black and Bonwell (1989) point out that frequently graduate students who have teaching assisantships (TAs) are given a class to teach with no prior training whatsoever. In fact, many TAs are "excused from" workshops on teaching because their major professors feel that their time will be better spent on their research. Black and Bonwell's study points out that "serious problems exist in the training of TAs" (p.436). The experienced professors deliver lectures, while the inexperienced TAs are left to do the more difficult task of leading discussions and evaluating students. They advocate that history faculties initiate programs which give TAs some practicum training before they teach their first classes. Encouraging TAs to observe and evaluate other TAs teaching the same course also is recommended. The review and assessment of TAs' teaching abilities by senior faculty is vital to helping them learn how to teach and

would improve undergraduate education "overall" (p. 437).

Teachers must learn new "hooks" with which they can draw students into the content of history. Shapiro (1991) recommends several things teachers can do to improve their ability to give their students a quality education. She recommends that instructors continue to go to school and "remain up to date" on current trends in their field (p. 60). In addition, attending teaching workshops can be useful in keeping instructors interested in their topic and in enabling them to apply new methods in teaching. We must "consider not only what we teach but how we teach it" (p. 61). The methods used to prepare our future history instructors and to keep all history teachers aware of new, more effective approaches to teaching will, hopefully, improve throughout the next decade.

BETTER METHODS FOR TEACHING HISTORY

In teaching a course in history (or any subject area) the instructor should explain all requirements, assign all readings, and give all test dates at the beginning of the course. According to Marlow (1988), the material should be presented:

> ... in a stimulating manner ... . Appropriate voice inflection, enthusiasm for teaching of history and quality eye contact with students in the class are musts for the ... college teacher (p. 4).

Cannon (1989) goes on to point out that:

> We should be aware of the tendency for our teaching to become over-cerebral, to neglect the emotional and aesthetic side of history and to convey the impression that history is to be found only in articles [and] textbooks (p. 264)

All too often history has been reduced to a central textbook from which the professor or instructor lectures. However, there are several methods and different ways of presenting history content and ideas which make it more meaningful to students. It is important to expose students to the many ways in which history can be viewed (Graves 1992). Teaching students to think systematically and critically about the strengths and weaknesses of differing views is the ultimate aim of providing a well rounded education.

Active Learning

One suggestion is to use active learning techniques, which actually involve the students in the learning process. McAndrews (1991) describes several methods he uses in history courses.

Debate

Holding a debate requires students to critically analyze a certain historical problem and is an excellent way to show two sides of a picture. For example, the teacher might ask the students to debate the question, "Was the American Revolution truly revolutionary?". First the class could be divided into two separate groups. Then each group should be given readings and background material that supports one historical view of the Revolution. Finally, the two groups would engage in a debate, with guidance from the instructor. The debate certainly would help students think more critically (p. 36).

Demonstration

Another active learning method is the use of a demonstration, which is "an oral exposition of an historical issue demonstrating change and continuity between past and present" (pp. 36-37). Using this method, a group of students is expected to present a demonstration, under the guidance of the instructor. For example, in teaching about foreign relations between Latin American countries, each

student in the group would become a representative of some Latin American country, say Mexico or Brazil. The students would then report to the rest of the class on their country's views and policies.

Simulation

The third technique for having the students take an active part in the educational process is called simulation and it is similar to the demonstration method. Simulation requires the students to act out certain historical events "from which students can draw historical lessons" (p. 39). An example of simulation is having a class act out the Constitutional Convention of 1789.

Each of these methods, when supplemented with appropriate reading material, can be used in any history classroom; each method really involves the students in the process of learning history.

Specialized Topics

There are other ways to make history more interesting and pertinent. One of these is by supplementing the general historical content of a course with more "specialized" topics. This is not to suggest that, for example, a Survey of American History course should be so specialized that it does not cover most of the "basics," but rather that the teacher should include tidbits of historical information that students will find interesting and meaningful to them. Lerner (1976) points out that including some women's histo-

ry in any history course can have lasting benefits. It can give female students "an exhilarating intellectual experience [which would] raise their self esteem and their education motivation" (p. 98). In a survey of American history, one could also include tidbits of history from the Black, Indian, and Oriental perspectives. The Bradley Commission on History in Schools (1989) tells us that because of the diverse heritage of Americans it is imperative that history "occupy a large and vital place in the education of the private citizen" (p. 8).

Primary Source Materials

Utilizing primary source materials in addition to a standard textbook can make history "come alive" for students. "Primary sources represent eyewitness accounts of events by those directly on the scene of the happening or occurrence" (Marlow 1988, p. 5). Carson and Otwell (1988) found out that nearly anything can be used as primary source material. For example, when they examined advertisements that appeared in Women's magazines at the end of the nineteenth century, they found that the ads conveyed certain attitudes toward the role of women in society. The "ads suggested that women were assigned to taking care of the home and the family and that housework entailed a certain high set of standards" (p. 21). Other examples of primary source material include diaries, newspapers, political

documents, and public declarations of the time period. One might want to use the slave narratives to explain the slaves' point of view, the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton to explain the early women's movement or the speeches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to discuss civil rights. There are many other examples, too numerous to mention.

Historical Films

According to O'Connor (1977), the use of film as an historical teaching tool has been greatly overlooked. Newsreels, propaganda films, television commercials, and historical documentaries can be used to help paint a meaningful picture of the past. Films like The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) and Atomic Cafe (1982) are excellent historical teaching tools and can be used as focal points for student discussions. Other more commercially released films like JFK, The Name of the Rose and Man for All Seasons also are appropriate, if viewed with a critical eye toward historical truth. These types of films can help students see some of the historical styles and help them discern what is "Hollywood" and what is history.

The Library

Using the library as a tool to enhance the teaching of history is another method which is helpful (Reitan 1978). Combining the learning of history with the learning of library research tools can lay a "foundation for historical

inquiry." This approach requires "close cooperation between the faculty and the librarians," who are eager for such cooperation (p. 88-89). This is especially useful if the instructor requires the students to write research papers. Donnelly (1989) advocates this method in large survey courses. It teaches students the value of using the library as a tool and, at the same time, prepares them for work in upper level courses, most of which require some type of research project. Donnelly requires students to pick an important historical figure and to write a biographical paper about that person. However, historical movements can be used as well: civil rights, the Beatniks, abolitionists, the temperance movement, etc. He found that most of his students felt the project was worthwhile. This is a very important step in teaching students the value of being able to do research and gives them the tools to begin the process of historical inquiry.

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction, which is widely available, is very much underused as a teaching method in history courses. Johnson (1991), King (1988), and Cain (1983) found that the use of historical fiction, along with a textbook and primary source materials, is a worthwhile way to make history more interesting and pertinent to students' lives. Historical fiction provides the "grass roots" view of a partial group of people and depicts them "confronting life's problems" and experiences (Cain 1983, pp. 26-27). King (1988) points out that sections of a novel or even the whole novel itself can be used to help students make judgments about:

> ... how they would react, what they would do, what would happen next. The use of historical imagination is thus encouraged (p. 26).

Using novels like Cooper's The Spy, Sinclair's The Jungle, and Kerouac's On The Road, can convey historical knowledge that a textbook would never be able to provide. While it takes more preparation on the part of the instructor to use historical fiction effectively, the rewards of increased student interest and active student participation more than make up for the extra effort. It is far more rewarding for both the teacher and students than simply teaching chronology.

SUMMARY

None of the teaching techniques and methods describe here will have an effect on students, unless they are taught from a humanistic perspective. History must be presented in a fashion in which students can relate it to their lives and find meaning in it. The first aim of history is "personal growth ... [which] satisfies ... peoples longing for a sense of identity and of their time and place in the human story" (Bradley Commission on History in Schools 1989 p. 11). Marrow (1982/83) tells us that our history teaching should include recognition and positive reinforcement for the students in the classroom. Instructors and students should work together to answer questions and solve problems. The main objective is to involve students. If history teachers presented themselves as fellow learners rather than as experts, the classroom would be a more humanistic place. Marrow goes on to suggest that "Tailoring a course to satisfy student diversity ... [is] an important ingredient in using a humanistic approach" (p. 25). This approach, used in conjunction with some of the methods mentioned, makes history much more fulfilling for both the students and the instructors.

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